

The Fate of Solidarity: Uses and Abuses

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Introduction: A Crisis of Universalism

In the course of the twentieth century something strange, and distorting, appears to have happened to the concept of ‘solidarity’¹. For the purposes of this analysis, we can take ‘solidarity’ as a rough equivalent, in a range of different historical conditions, of the third of the great ideals of the French revolution, as a rendering of the ‘Fraternity’ that accompanies ‘Liberty’ and ‘Equality’. Thus the word, as both ideal and concept has multiple implications, and in at least four dimensions: first, fraternity, or solidarity, *within* countries, between *similar* social groups, communities and, in the language of modern socialism above all, class²; secondly, support for those within countries who are in some way *different* but who have a claim based on common humanity, or at least common exploitation by a shared system of oppression, such as women, ethnic groups, or immigrants, this often subsumed in appeals to cultural pluralism or multiculturalism; thirdly, support for those who are within the polity or society in question but are *not* from the same social or class group, who are outside of, or foreign, to the community in question, but to whom support, what Kant termed *Hospitalitat*, or, in modern terminology, ‘Duties Towards Strangers’ is owed³; finally, international solidarity, in the conventional sense of supporting legitimate struggles, of workers, or ethnic groups, in other countries. Social and political categories do not have ‘essences’ or meanings that persist across time and place, but they usually exhibit a set of core meanings. Solidarity maintains at its core a value enjoining support for other humans whose rights, collective or individual, are being denied. Yet a survey even as brief as this should serve to illustrate that from its original, and apparently unproblematic, origins in the late eighteenth century the concept of solidarity has travelled a long way.

At its core, and in keeping with its origins in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, solidarity rests on one important principle, namely that of the shared moral and political value and equality of all human beings, and of the rights that attach to them. *The concept of solidarity presupposes that of rights, and the two were so combined, in rhetoric and policy, in the French revolution.* The reason to support others within our own society or in others is that they too have rights, by dint of the humanity we share. Hence the centrality, even if not always admitted or articulated, of

¹ An earlier version of this essay was published in Christine Chinkin and David Downes eds. ‘Crime, Social Control and Human Rights: Essays in Honour of Stan Cohen’ Oxford: Deer Park Productions, 2007.

² For one recent reworking of the concept of ‘Fraternity’ in regard to to the first and second of these meanings see Antoni Domènach, *El eclipse de la fraternidad. Una revisió republicana de la tradició socialista* Barcelona: Crítica, 2004. Domènach takes ‘fraternity’ to be the value that encapsulates the radical and democratic potential of the Enlightenment and applies the concept to three areas of social activity: the civilisation of the social sphere, the eradication of despotism in the family and in gender relations, and the elimination of oppression by bureaucratic-statist structures. A parallel if more strictly academic sociological critique of the atomisation and declining social cohesiveness of modernity is to be found in the work of Robert Putnam on the USA and, in an earlier generation, in David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*.

³ This last being the title of an original reflection by Michael Ignatieff on these issues, *Duties Towards Strangers*. A work of similar range and speculative insight is Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London: Penguin Books, 2003.

a concept of rights within any conception of solidarity. In the words of the noted South African legal and penal expert Stan Cohen: 'Human Rights are the last Grand Narrative'⁴. This observation encapsulates both the historical origins and the contemporary destiny of solidarity, conceived of as support for other human beings, and of human rights themselves. The French revolution has, as we know well, bred many Grand Narratives, but that of rights remains the most important, and enduring, of those outcomes. In the vocabulary of the French revolution, the term *citoyen/ne* or 'citizen' represented the equality of all persons as against the hierarchical system of Estates, just as the term *nation* denoted a community of equal agents.

It is against this background that it becomes possible to assess the current difficulties into which discussion of human rights, and, in related vein, solidarity have fallen. The briefest look at the contemporary world, will show that solidarity as a concept has travelled a very long way from the aspirations of 1789: it has served, amidst the political tensions of the twentieth century, as much to confuse and besmirch, as to realise in any ideal sense, the political programme of those who supported it, not least the socialist and liberal movements. Among the many ironies of this process has been the way in which solidarity has been declared with states, movements and individuals who in their practice deny the very concepts of rights on which the solidarity is supposedly justified in the first place. At the same time, the ideal and practice of solidarity has been turned against those, in the communist movement, who most sought to espouse it. It was one of the many ironies of the late twentieth century that the greatest internal challenge to a European communist state should have come from a movement of the industrial working class that adopted as its slogan, *Solidarnosc*.

This crisis of solidarity, and the related crises of universalism and of human rights, pervades not only those who are the self-conscious or self-proclaimed inheritors of the radical and liberal traditions of the Enlightenment, but also much of the right as well. Of course, conservatism was from the start opposed to any conception of human rights and of a politics deriving from a shared humanity, but the contribution of the left and of 'anti-imperialist' and Marxist thinkers to denigrating rights, and to undermining the international institutions and conventions on which the rights regime is based, has certain become stronger in recent years, as reflected in the widespread use of the term 'the imperialism of human rights'. Thus on the left, in the developed and third worlds, there is widespread disparagement of rights, either on the grounds that they reflect the values and pretexts of the imperialist and hegemonic countries or because, as if this is an argument in itself, they are a product of the oppressive, rationalist, Enlightenment, this latter held as the source of most, or even all, of our current ills. The practical implications of this are manifold, from support for nationalist and culturally specific derogation from universal principles, to blind endorsement of guerrilla and armed groups even when they violate the conventions of war, to wholesale opposition to humanitarian intervention on the grounds that this only masks imperial interests.

⁴ Stan Cohen, who was born in South Africa, has been Professor of Sociology at the Universities of Essex and Jerusalem and at LSE. He was the leading inspiration for the establishment at LSE of a Centre for the Study of Human Rights in 2000, of which I had the honour to be the first Director. His recent work focuses in particular on the role of truth commissions and post-conflict justice, see Stan Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* Cambridge: CUP, 2001.

Much of the critique of human rights and universal standards emanates from writers in the metropolitan countries, or by politicians and intellectuals in the third world. George Bush and his associates, notably his long serving Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez, did much to undermine respect for universal human rights and for international institutions. But others too have joined the fray, as in the rhetoric deployed by Osama bin Laden against western values, and framed in a moral context that explicitly rejects universalism, appealing to the followers of one religion, Islam, and only the Sunni part of them, and celebrating, as in the declarations made about Hurricane Katrina, the misfortunes of others. Thus the contribution made by militant Islamism to the weakening of universalism lies not only in the way in which it has emboldened and hardened the right, or in its grotesque celebratory contempt for the rules and norms of war, and of any claim to humane treatment of prisoners, but also in the moral particularism it espouses in such declamatory terms⁵.

On the right, and sometimes building, as Margaret Thatcher did in the 1980s, on earlier denials of rights, we have seen a widespread embrace of nationalism, not to mention foreign policy based on national interests, as the basis for internal action, a growing resiling from international conventions, most spectacularly from the Geneva Conventions on treatment of prisoners of war by the USA, coupled with growing opposition to the institutions tasked with implementing an international legal and, by implication, humanitarian order, be they the UN, or the European Union, or, in the case of the International Criminal Court established in 1998, by all five of the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council. All of this has been made easier by the failure of political elites and others in the west to take seriously the lesson of the end of the Cold War, namely that it was not, as the Reagan right in the USA argued, the pressure of western military power and expenditures that played the decisive role in breaking the authority and power of Soviet communism, but rather the commitments the USSR entered to in regard to human rights, in particular the Helsinki Accords of 1975, and the broader demonstration effect of western society, not least western European society, in combining broad respect for democratic and human rights values with sustained economic growth. In the collapse of communism in 1989-1991 some, particularly some opposition intellectual leaders in eastern Europe, did give credit where it was due, with international insistence on human rights, but many in the west did not hear the message⁶.

Historical Legacies

The crisis of universalism of the early 2000s is widespread and ominous. It will affect the workings both of individual states and of the international organisations charged with defence of human rights. It also negatively affects the work of, and public respect for, those non-state human rights organisations that operate in the west. Yet this crisis of the early twenty-first century is not entirely new, and indeed builds on earlier histories of critique, rejection and embroilment with power. The crisis of today

⁵ Bruce Lawrence ed., *Messages to the World. The Statements of Osama bin Laden* London: Verso, 2005. In a number of statements in 2007 Bin Laden has sought to modify the particularism of his earlier declarations and appeal to all the oppressed of the world, Muslim and non-Muslim.

⁶ For the long-term social and political processes that led to the end of communism, see Nicholas Bisley, *The End of the Cold War and the Causes of the Soviet Collapse* Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004.

is, in this sense, the legatee of an earlier history, even if one that it only partly remembers. Yet this anterior history is important not only as historical antecedent to the difficulties of today, but also because those involved in the debate today, both in favour of, and opposed to, principles of universalism may be repeating some of the mistakes, if not all of them, of yesteryear.

The first such period is that of colonialism. While much of the imperial project by western powers was associated with assertions of national or state interest, without regard to moral justification, there was always an undercurrent of apparent principle, generosity, even historical mission in the way imperialism was presented. Barolomé de las Casas in the seventeenth century and a range of political, religious and literary writings thereafter reflected this universalist, if ineffective, critique of colonial thought. Be it in this Spanish concern in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to convert the souls of heathen peoples of Latin America, the French *mission civilisatrice*, or the British with their ‘white man’s burden’, this claim to be promoting good in the world, even against those reluctant to accept such good, was recurrent. Little wonder then that from the early nineteenth century onwards, as liberalism and democratic thinking took hold in the metropolitan countries themselves, there were those who sought to apply its principles to the colonial world, and to justify, or reform, colonial projects in the light of such ideas: constitutional government, education, social reform, promotion of the rights of women, ultimately the most fundamental of all human rights and liberal principles, national self-determination.

It is impossible here to establish a balance sheet of this project, the association of liberal and progressive thinking, including on the part of some Marxists, with colonialism, let alone to dissect the combination of motives, from idealism to material self-interest, via inter-state competition, that motivated those who sought to reform colonialism. To take one example among many: the abolition of slavery allows, and will always allow, of several different interpretations, as will, at a later stage, the ‘granting’ of independence to the states of Asia and Africa after World War II. Equally, no general balance sheet can be drawn up of the success of such reform in implanting in non-European states the kinds of broadly democratic and open systems present in the metropolis: constitutional government, free press, rule of law, independent judiciary etc.

What can be said is that this apparently open and generous commitment on the part of the liberal and reforming constituencies in the developed world had at best partial effects. For all that reformers called, from the early nineteenth century onwards, for liberal principles to be shared with the colonies, European powers continued to control their dependencies for many decades with little attention to the wishes, or interests, of their subject peoples: till their final defeat in 1898, the Spaniards fought for all they were worth to suppress successive movements for independence in Cuba; the British held on in Ireland till 1922, and tried as late as 1956 in the Suez venture to re-impose control on the Arab world; the Italians massacred Libyans and Ethiopians through to the 1940s; the French drowned Algeria in blood in the independence war of 1954-1962; the Portuguese conducted their ferocious counter-insurgency wars in three African states until 1974; the USA, the late-comer to empire, its illusions, self-justifications and crimes, was to distinguish itself over a century, in the Philippines, in Vietnam and, most recently, in Iraq.

Against this background, the voices of those with a more liberal and universalist orientation counted for less. The optimism of the utilitarian and liberal thinkers James and John Stuart Mill with regard to good governance in India in the 1840s was drowned in the insurrection and subsequent counter-insurgency of 1867. Ireland was to promote many well-intentioned and liberal ideas with regard to Ireland, but in the end it was force of arms, within Ireland the rise of Sinn Fein and its subsequent electoral victory in 1918, and, more broadly, the exhaustion of Britain after World War I, that led to the granting of independence in 1922. The same combination of factors, metropolitan-colonial in the bilateral context, geopolitical in the global context, led to the defeat of the European colonial powers. Some individual anti-colonialists and critics of metropolitan violence apart, there is today little credit remaining in the broader historical narrative for those who sought to link the spread of European empire to concerns of human rights.

The second chapter in this unhappy linking of human rights and its emancipatory potential to broader trends in world history was written by communism, the most widespread, determined and comprehensive attempt ever seen to reform western society and, in so doing, to transform the world as a whole according to a different set of economic and political principles. Communism had a reasonable run, from 1917 to 1991, more or less one human lifetime, and more or less the same time expanse as that of European colonialism at its height from 1870 to 1945. As with colonialism, calculations of power, interest and violence were never far from the actions of states, and of social movements, in this period. Equally, as with colonialism, there were many who, with varying degrees of misgiving, supported the communist project on grounds of moral solidarity, belief in its goals or crude sense that it represented in some positive teleological manner the path of history, the 'future'. That like colonialism the communist project had its costs, and its bloody mistakes, was taken for granted, but these, so it was believed, paled before the atrocities and waste of human potential associated with capitalism. And, as with colonialism, there were times when the sheer enormity of the deaths perpetrated by communism (as in Stalin's purges of the 1930s, or the Chinese famine of the late 1950s, or the years of Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia, 1976-8) produced incredulity, as did, in earlier times, the slaughter of the peoples of the Americas by the Spanish and Portuguese, or the death of millions in the Congo of King Leopold.

The idealism of those who supported communism, and the subsequent moral and intellectual crises this provoked, may now seem a thing of the past, but this association of liberalism and reform, in general of historic optimism and solidarity, with communism, had a terrible, and enduring, cost. In the first place, among those who were themselves associated with this project, be it formally as members of a Communist Party or not, it bred a widespread culture of cynicism and ruthlessness, masked as historical expediency and decisiveness. Lenin was often cited on the need to break eggs if you had to make an omelette. In his introduction to the book, Sartre unreservedly and with gruesome enthusiasm endorsed the calls to violence of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. This culture affected not just those directly involved in the maintenance of the Soviet system in the USSR and eastern Europe, but also those who in communist parties elsewhere, and including their associates or 'fellow travellers', defended that system. It involved a contempt for truth, for open discussion, for law, indeed for democracy, backed up with an array of methods for delegitimizing and discrediting opponents. What is remarkable about this culture is that decades after this

communist culture began to lose influence it lives on in many parts of the left, and among intellectuals, including some very prominent ones, who, without any anterior linkage to communism, espouse radical causes.

However, there was another cost of communism. This lay in the loss of human optimism and commitment it occasioned, in the disillusion of many who had thrown themselves with idealism into the communist cause and who had seen in it the path to the general emancipation of mankind. Here the consequences were enormous, on the one hand in the depoliticisation and alienation of millions of people who left, or were expelled from, communist parties, or who, living under communist regimes, witnessed directly the corruption, mendacity and inefficiency of the system, but on the other the whole-scale discrediting on a world scale of the moral and political goals of the revolutionary socialist programme. If the first grave-digger of the global moral imagination was colonialism, the second was communism. It is against this background that we can come to the more recent past, and the association of liberal internationalism with the world of the 1990s, in particular humanitarian intervention, and associated processes of democratisation and growth in international human rights regimes.

It is hard, from the contested perspective of the mid-2000s, to recall just how bright the future appeared a mere decade and a half ago: the end of the Cold War had removed the conflict that blocked effective functioning of the UN and in particular of the Security Council; the successful campaign to free Kuwait from Iraqi occupation seemed to presage a new commitment to legal, and effective, defence of human rights and international law; the end of communism produced a new international legal and moral climate in which fundamental differences of principle appeared absent; in all continents, democracy appeared to be advancing against dictatorships, of left and right; with Clinton, the USA was committed to a more open, liberal, agenda in the political, economic and social fields.

No wonder that in this context too liberal individuals and organisations sought to intervene in the public realm, and to support, or seek to recruit to their causes, the major states on the international arena. NGOs and others lobbied for a range of progressive causes, from women's rights and the environment, to development aid and debt relief. As the wars in the Balkans began in 1992, there were many who, with varying degrees of misgiving, called for direct military intervention on the part of the USA, NATO or the UN, something that, in time, from Bosnia in 1995 to Kosovo in 1999, they got. All of this was accompanied by apparently major advances in the international institutions associated with the liberal project: consolidation and expansion of the European Union, the Kyoto Protocol on the environment, the International Criminal Court. 'Global civil society' appeared on the scene, linking activist groups in many countries, and, with a clamour of many demands and agenda, lobbying major states, institutions and companies, for more transparency and more responsible policies. Episodically, if with decreasing enthusiasm, on the fiftieth anniversary of 1995 and the sixtieth of 2005, there was talk of reforming the UN itself. Even if the institutions of the UN itself were largely frozen, there was considerable policy development in the organisation itself, as reflected in the high-

level commissions that reported on peace-keeping, and on the ‘Right to Intervene’⁷. Such was the momentum behind liberal internationalism that, even with the advent of the Bush administration, and the invasion of Iraq, the Secretary-General still felt able to commission a committee of senior experts to develop norms of intervention in 2005, to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the UN⁸.

Yet within a few years, and in a more rapid re-run of the risky association of liberal optimism with global trends seen in the days of colonialism and in those of communism, matters soon came to look very different⁹. Not only did much of the liberal agenda come to nothing, but the very attempt to relate such an agenda, with all its hopes and qualifications, to the policies of major powers came back to discredit the very principles and sentiments that had underlain the association in the first place. Many reasons for this outcome can be adduced, from an inherent lack of realism in much of what was originally envisaged during the 1990s, to the shift in political centre of gravity within the USA so dramatically to the right in the elections of November 2000, to the very serious and negative consequences of the 9/11 and subsequent *jihadi* attacks on the USA and, to a growing extent, on western European opinion and policy.

There were many components of this change, from the US rejection of Kyoto and the ICC, to the rise of community- and identity-based politics in many countries, but two events above all impelled events in the direction they took, the Al Qaida attack on the USA in September 2001 and the subsequent US attack on Iraq in March 2003. Between them, they served seriously to undermine the commitment to universalism and to human rights in the international arena and within the public opinion of both western and Middle Eastern states. If 9/11 dealt a serious blow to liberal optimism about the world, and to a US commitment to global values and institutions, the invasion of Iraq, and all that followed, served more than any other event to discredit the cause of humanitarian intervention and of any western commitment to human rights and respect for the rules of war. That the US invasion of Iraq was associated in the antecedent months, and in many later incidents, with outright lying, denial and hypocrisy on the part of the USA and its allies, and was accompanied in no significant manner by attempts to promote human rights elsewhere in the Middle East, only served the more to discredit this venture, and any post-1991 global optimism. What the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and of Czechoslovakia in 1968 were to the cause of international communism, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was to the ideals and legality of humanitarian intervention. Yet the biggest damage by the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was not a simple result of the US lying before, and grotesque mismanagement of the occupation, after the war, but the way in which *on both sides of the argument* historical and moral simplification prevailed¹⁰.

⁷ Commission on Global Government, *Our Global Neighbourhood*, London: 1995; Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, co-chairs Gareth Evans and Mohamed Sahnoun, *The Responsibility to Protect* Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, December 2001.

⁸ Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, *A more secure world: Our shared responsibility* 2005.

⁹ One such liberal rethink, and this before the Iraq invasion, is in David Rieff *A Bed for the Night. Humanitarianism in Crisis* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002.

¹⁰ A vivid account of how a part of the Iraqi exile community, long opposed on democratic and socialist grounds to the Ba’thist dictatorship, came to support the invasion is given by George Packer, *The Assassin’s Gate. America in Iraq* London: Faber, 2005, Chapter 3 ‘The Exiles’. The moral

The Middle East

If the discussion so far has focussed on the general interaction of liberal and radical universalism with historical forces and states, there is also a need to see how, in regard to particular regions of the world, the concept and practice of solidarity has run into difficulties. Here again we can see how an initially open and internationalist support for other peoples or states, derived from a concept of their shared entitlement to rights, can easily become something else, i.e. partial, instrumental, and in denial as to the violation of rights by the very peoples and states to whom solidarity is being offered. Such an examination is possible in regard to many parts of the world where social and ethnic conflict has taken place in recent decades, from Indo-china and Southern Africa to Cyprus, the Balkans, Ireland. Yet arguably no region of the world so illustrates the claims and counter-claims of international moral discourse, and the contradictions this can lead to, than the Middle East, this understood as the broad West Asian region within which the Arab-Israeli question plays a significant but only one among many part¹¹.

The association of debates on solidarity with the Middle East can be observed by examining many episodes in the recent history of the Middle East, where issues of solidarity and political engagement arose, but in conditions of confusion and disarray. Thus the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979 prompted very different responses outside, as well as inside, that country, with much of the international left supporting the clerical regime that emerged from that revolution¹². When, at the same time as the Islamic revolution took power in Iran, a communist regime was established in neighbouring Afghanistan, it received almost no international support, above all when it called on Soviet troops to protect it. Yet it was out of that war in Afghanistan, in the 1980s, that there was to emerge the transnational *jihadi* movement that crystallised around Al Qaida and which led to 9/11 and all that followed. Other events in that

ambivalence which the 'anti-war' demonstrations occasioned in some observers is well conveyed in the novel by Ian McEwan, *Saturday* London: Jonathan Cape, 2005. At one point the main protagonist, the surgeon Henry Perowne observes the demonstrators marching through Central London in February 2003. 'Perowne knows that when a powerful imperium – Assyrian, Roman, American – makes war and claims just cause, history will not be impressed. He also worries that the invasion or the occupation will be a mess. The marchers could be right. And he acknowledges the accidental nature of opinions...but Perowne can't feel, as the marchers themselves probably can, that they have an exclusive hold on moral discernment' (p. 73). See also the very similar reflections of the astute US Middle East commentator Joe Stork, note 15 below.

¹¹ The long-running argument about whether *all* the problems in the Middle East stem from the Palestine question, as most Arabs and Moslems maintain, or that it has *nothing to do with* the other problems of the region, as most Israelis and Americans assert, is misguided. This is an issue that can be resolved by study and analysis, not diatribe. Attention to the historical record since the 1940s shows that in some countries and in some periods, e.g. Egypt in the late 1940s, Jordan in the late 1960s, Lebanon from the late 1970s the conflict played a central role. At the same time it had little to do with, *inter alia*, the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, the first or second Algerian wars, the Kurdish issue in Iraq and Turkey, the social character of oil-producing states etc.

¹² On the confusions of the European and North American left about the Iranian revolution see Danny Postel, *Reading 'Legimitation Crisis' in Tehran: Iran and the Future of Liberalism* Chicago: Prickly Pear Press, 2006; and Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* 2005.

region were also to show up the inadequacies of international discussion: the Iranian condemnation of Salman Rushdie in 1989, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. In regard to Rushdie, what was, in its essence, a matter of free speech was met by many with condemnation of the author and a set of mawkish appeals to relativism, 'respect' for the authority of clerics and much else beside. In regard to Kuwait, most of the left opposed the UN decision to expel the Iraqi invaders, even though it was as clear a case of state aggression and violation of the Charter as could be imagined. It is as if the Middle East has been the graveyard not only of imperial ambitions, British, French, Russian and now American, but also of clear-headed moral and legal discussion of the challenges it poses.

This is above all true, of course, for the Palestine question, the most prominent, if far from the only, of the inter-ethnic and inter-state conflicts that the region contains. Here there has been a history of one-sidedness and partisan engagement, albeit with quite dramatic shifts of partisanship on the way. In its origins, the state of Israel was widely supported by the left. The USSR recognised Israel before the USA and supplied, directly and indirectly, the arms that helped the Israelis win the war of 1948-9 and establish their state. In the 1950s and early 1960s the overall liberal and socialist consensus in Europe and the USA was in favour of Israel, and paid scant attention to the rights of the Palestinians. This was a time before the emergence of the Palestinian guerrilla movement: the PLO had been set up in Cairo a few months earlier, in January 1964, initially under the control of the Arab states, and of Egypt in particular, but its first armed action was to come a few weeks later, in January 1965, in an attack on a water pumping station near Galilee, a site to which, years later, an Israeli academic colleague saw fit to take me. For nearly everyone in the west, of left or right, the Palestinian issue was not one of a people's right to land or self-determination, but one of 'the refugees'. The focus was one the obstacles to resettlement (by Israel and the Arab states respectively), as if the Palestinians were in some way, this only twenty years after World War II, a late addition to the millions of Displaced Persons and others whom the European conflict had shunted across frontiers.

For much of the world in the 1960s 'solidarity', understood as respect for the rights and political aspirations of the group supported, attached to Israel: the murder of Jews in Europe was still recent, the Palestinians were not a visible or organised force. Israel enjoyed enormous authority, not so much as a close ally of the west, which at that time it was not (the alliance with the USA took shape only in the late 1960s) but as the site of an experiment in socialist economics and living, epitomised by the kibbutz system. If there was, on the left sympathy for 'Arab' causes, it focussed more on the experiment in 'Arab Socialism' under Nasser in Egypt and on the experiences of workers' control and peasant co-operatives that had arisen out of the Algerian revolutionary war of 1954-1962, perhaps also, for a few, backing for the remote but reputedly resolute Imamate of Oman (which by early 1959 had, in fact, ceased to exist).

All of this was to change, of course, after the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, with the emergence of the Palestinian resistance movement, in the West Bank and in Jordan and the gradual loss of sympathy for Israel across much of the world. This latter process did not take place overnight: Cuba, for example, maintained relations with, and expressed admiration for, Israel until after the war of 1973. Then came 1967 and

the redrawing of the battle lines, on the ground in the Middle East, with the conquest by Israel of all of mandate Palestine, and the rise, on the left internationally, of a movement of solidarity with the Palestinian people. The June war took place over four decades ago, but amidst all the controversies that have followed, the issues, much of the language of identification and rejection, the historical points of dispute, have done little but bring us much of the same. In the mass of material spoken and written since the explosion of the Lebanese-Israeli conflict in the summer of 2006 there was little, in argument, explanation, or sentiment that is new.

Marxism, Liberalism and the Palestine Question

To gauge how little discussion of the Arab-Israeli cause has advanced over recent decades, it is worth recalling some earlier assertions of a universalist position on this conflict, one, by Isaac Deutscher, from an independent Marxist perspective, the other of Hannah Arendt from that of a courageous liberalism¹³. In this interview Deutscher struck a note that is almost wholly absent in more recent debates, where claims of identity prevail over universal principle, where exclusionary identification with one side or the other predominates, where both are guilty of atrocities of war and massive and callous political blunders. Deutscher's argument rested on three clear and courageous premises: that both leaderships, Arab and Israeli, were guilty of demagoguery and misleading their own people, above all by promising a victory that was unattainable and by stoking hatred of other peoples and religions; that the antecedent histories of both peoples, genocide in Europe for the Jews, and denial of national rights for the Palestinians, could not be deployed to legitimate the maximal current claims of either side; and, resolutely adhered to throughout his argument, that the Israelis and Palestinians were peoples with legitimate claims, that should be recognised on a sensible, and lasting, territorial and political basis. Above all, in the tones of anti-clerical and universalist disdain, something all too lacking in these days of grovelling before 'identity', 'tradition' and 'faith communities', he was clear in his rejection of the invocation of the sacred, the God-given, in political debate, of Talmudic obscurantism and bloodthirsty Arab calls for vengeance alike. He would have had little time for the Orthodox Rabbis of the West Bank or the discourses of Sheikh Fadlallah.

The other author who, in work not directly related to the Arab-Israeli question but with immense relevance to it, and to the arguments taking place in the broader world about it, laid down an internationalist position was Hannah Arendt. A German philosopher who had lived in the USA during World War II she published a work on the trial in Jerusalem in 1961 of the Nazi war criminal and organiser of the gas chambers Adolf Eichmann. This work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, was best known for the controversial phrase, born of watching this shifty and apparently 'normal' man in the glass dock, 'the banality of evil'. Yet this controversy is undeserved, as anyone who has studied the vast literature on killing in other dictatorships and massacres across the world can testify: it applies as much to the GULAG of Stalin, as to the massacres of Rwanda and Bosnia. Milosevic in his box in The Hague made the same point.

¹³ Isaac Deutscher, 'On the Arab-Israeli War', *New Left Review* 67, 1967; Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem A Report on the Banality of Evil* London: Penguin Books, 1977 (originally Viking Press 1963).

What was much more controversial was Arendt's critique of the legal and moral case made by the Israeli prosecutors against Eichmann. For, whereas the Nuremberg trials of the Nazi war criminals had been conducted under what at least purported to be some form of 'international' law, the precursor of later codes of universal jurisdiction, crimes against humanity and the International Criminal Court, Eichmann was prosecuted for the taking of *Jewish* lives and in a Jewish court. A legal case that had, in 1946, been weak in some points of principle, but confident in its universalist aspirations, that of the International Military Tribunal, had, in the early 1960s been converted into something that derived its authority and legitimacy from the ethnicity of the victims. And this ethnicisation of the victims was, at the same time, deemed to convey a particular right, if not responsibility, on the state that lay claim to representing those victims, namely Israel.

Herein lies the core of much contemporary confusion, and passion, about the Arab-Israeli question and, indeed, about the numerous other inter-ethnic conflicts across the world where local rhetoric and partisan international solidarity prevail, as if one side were angels and the other devils - Cyprus, Bosnia, Nagorno-Karabagh, Northern Ireland to name but some. In regard to the Middle East, Muslims and Arabs across the world identify with the Palestinians, or, since the expulsion of the Israelis in July 2000 from Lebanon, Hizbullah on ethnic, religious and communitarian lines; many Jews do the same, in support of Israel. Solidarity is here interlocked with particularism. Even many of those Jews who oppose the policies of the state of Israel speak as Jews ('not in my name').

Yet there is, arguably, a regression here, of ominous import, insofar as membership of a particular community, or claims of affinity, ethnicity or religious association with others, is deemed to convey either particular rights, or particular moral clarity, on those making such claims. In purely logical, and rational, terms, this is a nonsense. To take the example of the war of 2006: the crimes of the Israelis in wantonly attacking the infrastructure of Lebanon, and denying Palestinians their national rights, and the crimes of Hizbullah and Hamas in killing civilians, placing the lives and security of their peoples recklessly at risk, hurling thousands of missiles at civilian targets in Israel and fomenting religious and ethnic hatred, do not require particularist denunciation, i.e. that the one killed Arabs or Muslims, the other spilt Jewish blood. They are crimes on the basis of universal principles, of law, decency, humanity, and should be identified as such. Particularism undermines the very basis of the denunciation, which presupposes universal principles.

Current political orthodoxy in Europe and the USA inclines to giving a legitimate, even privileged, place to 'communities' with a particular concern on international issues, from Armenians and Kashmiris, to Irish, Muslims and Jews. However, the opposite argument can and should be made: ethnic and religious communities abroad should, in this regard, be the last people to consult, for either rational explanation or moral compass in regard to such events. In early 2005, when interviewed by a BBC panel set up to consider accusations of bias in regard to the Arab-Israeli dispute, I was given a list of the British-based groups the panel had consulted - Muslim and Arab on one side, Jewish and Zionist on the other: my recommendation to the panel was to ignore completely what any of them said and to question whether they should have any standing in the matter.

Human Rights and the Norms of War

Developments in regard to human rights in general and debate on the Arab-Israeli dispute in particular can lead us back to the need to reaffirm some of the core principles that inform the concept of solidarity and of human rights¹⁴. Equally, a condemnation of the actions of these militarised states and guerrilla groups needs to be based not only on a rejection of their demagoguery and chauvinism, but also on something central to the body of rights and legal instruments we have, and that was long neglected, above all by the left, and is still trampled on in much discussion of the war in Iraq, namely *respect for the laws and norms of war*, as in the Geneva Protocols of 1949, the Additional Protocols of 1977 and other related documents. Today we see across the world movements of solidarity, with the 'Iraqi resistance', Hamas, or Hizbullah that, while invoking universal principles of war against Israelis or the US forces in Iraq, fail completely to apply the same principles the behaviour of the guerrilla and other groups, many of them guilty of terrible acts of barbarism, murder, intimidation of civilians, and fostering of inter-communal hatred. While esteemed voices of the British left, high on their anti-imperialist rectitude, revel in the slaughter of civilian UN officials in Iraq, others condone the killing of children in Israel, and the wanton sacrificing of the security, stability, indeed sanity of the whole population of Lebanon in the name of a self-proclaimed 'national resistance'. And all of this from groups, in Palestine and Lebanon, who for years sought to destroy the one chance for co-existence and peace between Israelis and Palestinians that did arise, in the Oslo Accords of 1993 and then, egged on by their fellow travelling intellectual acolytes in the west, proceeded to trample on Oslo's grave.

Solidarity today, if it is true to the universalist premises of the original concept, is not embodied in partisan and morally one-eyed campaigns of support for one group of combatants or another, the activity of most 'solidarity' campaigns, let alone in the denunciation of crimes by one side and apologia or silence with regard to the other. It rests with those who go beyond this partisanship, whose moral authority, and factual accuracy, transcend those of the 'solidarity' groups. This would include the work of journalists and diplomats who honestly seek to document and draw attention to human rights violations in war, and those, particularly in the human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, who resolutely, calmly and with as much accuracy as war and propaganda allow, document and condemn the crimes, and political follies, of both sides. Advocacy of respect for the rules of war, and protection of combatants and civilians alike in war, has long been the priority of the International Committee of the Red Cross. It is their courage, and their sustained

¹⁴ Any hope, which lingered among some Marxists and socialists even into the 1970s, that a solution to this, or any other, inter-ethnic conflict could be found on the bases of 'proletarian internationalism' and solidarity must be dispelled, as ineffectual at best, and dangerous at most: proletarian solidarity did not save the Jews of Europe in the 1940s and has not reconciled Arabs and Jews thereafter. For one excellent account of the attempt by communists and socialists in Egypt and Israel to sustain such a position against the rise to power of the nationalist state, see Joel Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying Here? Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel, 1948-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Within the Arab world, while some of the militant and chauvinist rhetoric about Israel came from the self-proclaimed 'Marxist-Leninist' left, e.g. the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, it was also left-wing leaders within Palestine who continued to adopt a principled, internationalist, position on the conflict (e.g. communit leader Emile Touma, the novelist Emile Habiby).

independence and clarity of vision, that should guide commentary on current conflicts. Human rights may be the last Grand Narrative, but it is one with more than sufficient intellectual and moral authority to carry us many years into the future¹⁵.

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Ends

¹⁵ A fine example of this position, and from someone with experience over several decades in solidarity, analytic and human rights issues related to the Middle East is the article by Joe Stork, formerly editor of *MERIP Reports*, then Middle East official at Human Rights Watch, 'What Solidarity Requires', *The Progressive* January 2003. In regard to the debate on intervention in Iraq, Stork writes: 'Solidarity with Iraqis requires a commitment to support their struggles to achieve such rights, and that means taking seriously the need to protect vast numbers of Iraqis from the ongoing deprivations of this government. Anything less betrays an opportunism on the part of the opponents of the war that mimics the opportunistic invocation of human rights by the proponents of the war'. He does not advocate support for a US invasion, but rather stresses that any position invoking solidarity and support for human rights had to support opposition to the government of Saddam Hussein.